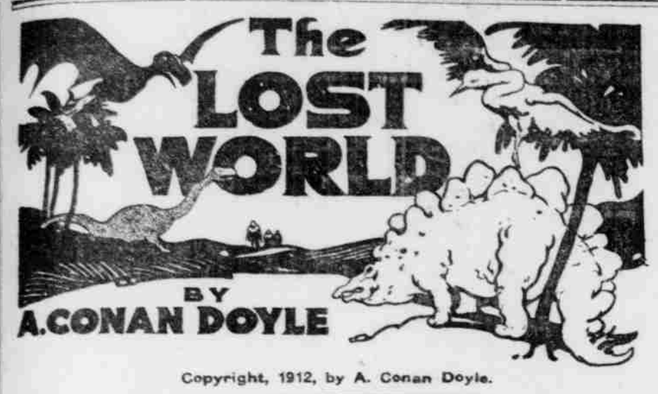

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CHAPTER III.

"It's Just the Very Biggest Thing In the World."

HARDLY was it shut when Mrs. Challenger darted out from the dining room. The small woman was in a furious temper. She barred her husband's way like an enraged chicken in front of a bulldog. It was evident that she had seen my exit, but had not observed my return.

"You brute, George!" she screamed. "You've hurt that nice young man."

He jerked backward with his thumb. "Here he is, safe and sound behind me."

She was confused, but not unduly so. "I am so sorry. I didn't see you."

"I assure you, madam, that it is all right."

"He has marked your poor face! Oh, George, what a brute you are! Nothing but scandals from one end of the week to the other. Every one hating and making fun of you. You've finished my patience. This ends it!"

"Dirty linen," he rumbled.

"It's not a secret!" she cried. "Do you suppose that the whole street—the whole of London, for that matter—Get away, Austin. We don't want you here. Do you suppose they don't all talk about you? Where is your dignity? You a man who should have been regius professor at a great university with a thousand students all revering you! Where is your dignity, George?"

"How about yours, my dear?"

"You try me too much. A ruffian, a common brawling ruffian—that's what you have become."

"Be good, Jessie."

"A roaring, raging bully!"

"That's done it! Stool of penance!" said he.

To my amazement, he stooped, picked her up and placed her sitting upon a high pedestal of black marble in the angle of the hall. It was at least seven feet high and so thin that she could hardly balance upon it. A more absurd object than she presented cocked up there with her face convulsed with anger, her feet dangling and her body rigid for fear of an upset, I could not imagine.

"Let me down!" she wailed.

"Say 'please.'"

"You brute, George! Let me down this instant!"

"Come into the study, Mr. Malone."

"Really, sir"— said I, looking at the lady.

"Here's Mr. Malone pleading for you, Jessie. Say 'please' and down you come."

"Oh, you brute! Please, please!"

He took her down as if she had been a canary.

"You must behave yourself, dear. Mr. Malone is a press man. He will have it all in his rag tomorrow and sell an extra dozen among our neighbors. 'Strange Story of High Life'—you felt fairly high on that pedestal, did you not? Then a subtitle, 'Glimpse of a Singular Menage.' He's a foul feeder, is Mr. Malone, a carrion eater, like all of his kind—porcus ex grege diaboli—a swine from the devil's herd. That's it, Malone—what?"

"You are really intolerable!" said I hotly.

He bellowed with laughter.

"We shall have a coalition presently," he boomed, looking from his wife to me and puffing out his enormous chest. Then, suddenly altering his tone, "Excuse this frivolous family badinage, Mr. Malone. I called you back for some more serious purpose than to mix you up with our little domestic pleasantries. Run away, little woman and don't fret." He placed a huge hand upon each of her shoulders. "All that you say is perfectly true. I should be a better man if I did what you advise, but I shouldn't be quite George Edward Challenger. There are plenty of better men, my dear, but only one G. E. C. So make the best of him." He suddenly gave her a resounding kiss, which embarrassed me even more than his violence had done. "Now, Mr. Malone," he continued, with a great accession of dignity, "this way, if you please."

We re-entered the room which we had left [illegible] minutes before. The professor closed the door carefully behind us, motioned me into an armchair and pushed a cigar box under my nose.

"Real San Juan Colorado," he said. "Excitable people like you are the better for narcotics. Heavens, don't bite it! Cut and cut with reverence. Now lean back and listen attentively to whatever I may care to say to you. If any remark should occur to you you can reserve it for some more opportune time.

"First of all, as to your return to my house after your most justifiable expulsion"—he protruded his beard and stared at me as one who challenges and invites contradiction—"after, as I say, your well merited expulsion. The reason lay in your answer to that most officious policeman, in which I seemed to discern some glimmering of good feeling upon your part—more, at any rate, than I am accustomed to associate with your profession."

All this he boomed forth like a professor addressing his class. He had swung around his revolving chair so as to face me, and he sat all puffed out like an enormous bullfrog, his head laid back and his eyes half covered by supercilious lids. Now he suddenly turned himself sideways, and all I could see of him was tangled hair with a red, protruding ear. He was scratching about among the litter of papers upon his desk. He faced me presently with what looked like a very tattered sketchbook in his hand.

"I am going to talk to you about South America," said he. "No comments, if you please. First of all, I wish you to understand that nothing I tell you now is to be repeated in any public way unless you have my express permission. That permission will in all human probability never be given. Is that clear?"

"It is very hard," said I. "Surely a judicious account"—

He replaced the notebook upon the table.

"That ends it," said he. "I wish you a very good morning."

"No, no!" I cried. "I submit to any conditions. So far as I can see, I have no choice."

"None in the world," said he.

"Well, then, I promise."

"Word of honor?"

"Word of honor."

He looked at me with doubt in his insolent eyes.

"After all, what do I know about your honor?" said he.

"Upon my word, sir," I cried angrily, "you take very great liberties! I have never been so insulted in my life."

He seemed more interested than annoyed at my outbreak.

"Round headed," he muttered. "Brachycephalic, gray eyed, black haired, with suggestion of the negroid. Celtic, I presume?"

"I am an Irishman, sir."

"Irish Irish?"

"Yes, sir."

"That, of course, explains it. Let me see, you have given me your promise that my confidence will be respected? That confidence, I may say, will be far from complete. But I am prepared to give you a few indications which will be of interest. In the first place, you are probably aware that two years ago I made a journey to South America, one which will be classical in the scientific history of the world. The object of my journey was to verify some conclusions of Wallace and of Bates, which could only be done by observing their reported facts under the same conditions in which they had themselves noted them. If my expedition had no other results it would still have been noteworthy, but a curious incident occurred to me while there which opened up an entirely fresh line of inquiry.

"You are aware—or probably, in this half educated age, you are not aware—that the country round some parts of the Amazon is still only partially explored and that a great number of tributaries, some of them entirely uncharted, run into the main river. It was my business to visit this little known back country and to examine its fauna, which furnished me with the materials for several chapters for that great and monumental work upon zoology which will be my life's justification. I was returning, my work accomplished, when I had occasion to spend a night at a small Indian village at a point where a certain tributary—the name and position of which I withhold—opens into the main river. The natives were Cucama Indians, an amiable but degraded race, with mental powers hardly superior to the average Londoner. I had effected some cures among them upon my way up the river and had impressed them considerably with my personality, so that I was not surprised to find myself eagerly awaited upon my return. I gathered from their signs that some one had urgent need of my medical services, and I followed the chief to one of his huts. When I entered I found that the sufferer to whose aid I had been summoned had that instant expired. He was, to my surprise, no Indian, but a white man. Indeed, I may say a very white man, for he was flaxen haired and had some characteristics of an albino. He was clad in rags, was very emaciated and bore every trace of prolonged hardship. So far as I could understand the account of the natives he was a complete stranger to them and had come upon their village through the woods alone and in the last stage of exhaustion.

"The man's knapsack lay beside the couch, and I examined the contents. His name was written upon a tab within it—'Maple White, Lake avenue, Detroit, Mich.'

"From the contents of the knapsack it was evident that this man had been an artist and poet in search of effects. There were scraps of verse. I do not profess to be a judge of such things, but they appeared to me to be singularly wanting in merit.

"I was turning away from him when I observed that something projected from the front of his ragged jacket. It was this sketchbook, which was as dilapidated then as you see it now. Indeed, I can assure you that a first folio of Shakespeare could not be treated with greater reverence than this relic has been since it came into my possession. I hand it to you now, and I ask you to take it page by page and to examine the contents."

He helped himself to a cigar and leaned back with a fiercely critical pair of eyes, taking note of the effect which this document would produce.

I had opened the volume with some expectation of a revelation, though of what nature I could not imagine. The first page was disappointing, however, as it contained nothing but the picture of a very fat man in a pea jacket, with the legend, "Jimmy Colver on the Mail Boat," written beneath it. There followed several pages which were filled with small sketches of Indians and their ways. Then came a picture of a cheerful and corpulent ecclesiastic in a shovel hat, sitting opposite a very thin European, and the inscription, "Lunch With Fra Cristofero at Rosario." Studies of women and babies accounted for several more pages, and then there was an unbroken series of animal drawings with such explanations as "Manatee Upon Sandbank," "Turtles and Their Eggs," "Black Ajouti Under a Miriti Palm," the matter disclosing some sort of piglike animal, and finally came a double page of studies of long snouted and very unpleasant saurians. I could make nothing of it and said so to the professor.

"Surely these are only crocodiles?"

"Alligators! Alligators! There is hardly such a thing as a true crocodile in South America. The distinction between them"—

"I meant that I could see nothing unusual—nothing to justify what you have said."

He smiled serenely.

"Try the next page," said he.

I was still unable to sympathize. It was a full page sketch of a landscape roughly tinted in color, the kind of painting which an open air artist takes as a guide to a future more elaborate effort. There was a pale green foreground of feathery vegetation, which sloped upward and ended in a line of cliffs dark red in color and curiously ribbed like some basaltic formations which I have seen.

"Well?" he asked.

"It is no doubt a curious formation," said I, "but I am not geologist enough to say that it is wonderful."

"Wonderful!" he repeated. "It is unique. It is incredible. No one on earth has ever dreamed of such a possibility. Now the next."

I turned it over and gave an exclamation of surprise. There was a full page picture of the most extraordinary creature that I had ever seen. It was the wild dream of an opium smoker, a vision of delirium. The head was like that of a fowl, the body that of a bloated lizard, the trailing tail was furnished with upward turned spikes, and the curved back was edged with a high serrated fringe, which looked like a dozen cocks' wattles placed behind each other. In front of this creature was an absurd mannikin or dwarf in human form, who stood staring at it.

(Continued next Saturday.)

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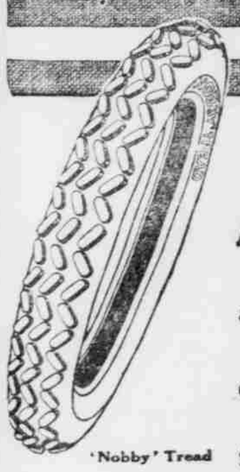

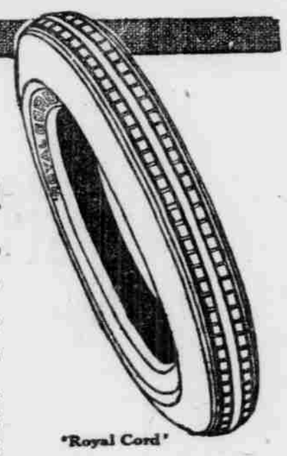

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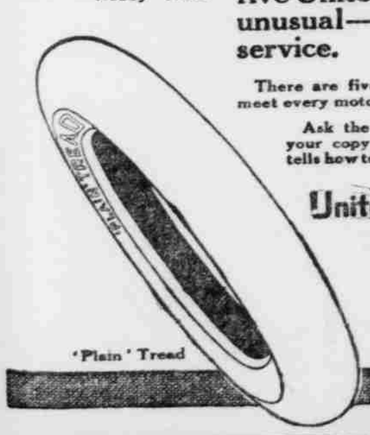

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